

Vignettes

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A collection of small works that have little to no correlation to each other.
Mostly just random ideas I had to put down.

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Vignettes

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Voices

Chapter 1: Voices

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Kris stood in the bathroom of their house in front of the mirror, still fogged from the condensation from their shower. The door is closed, but unlocked. They raised a hand and pressed it to the smooth reflective surface before swiping a zig-zag to reveal their nudity. They had toweled off recently, but still their hair was wet enough to be slicked back from their face and it provided them with an unobstructed view to just stare. They took themselves in slowly, eyes traveling over every detail as if to catalogue it for posterity. They should have felt something, they think. They should feel fondness or revulsion, they think. But it's just a body.

Their reflection moved and they already know what's going to happen when their eyes go down and see the handle resting on their palm. It was slick from condensation as well, yet as it sat there it was so innocently unassuming. They should have felt something then, maybe. Eagerness. Disgust. They don't even feel anything when they push the button and the blade flicks out, clicking into place.

Kris raises their eyes back to their reflection as the blade makes its way to poke at their abdomen. The blade is warm in the humid air and dimples into their skin with its pressure. What should they be feeling now? They don't have time to consider before the blade moves. They gasp at the sensation of it as it leaves a red trail towards their navel before stopping. A little longer than an inch, but they can feel now and the sensation is indescribable in its complexity. The knife is moved and there was another cut below the first and Kris has to hiss as this one is made. They found that exhaling makes this easier and before they even know it there's a third that they hadn't intended to make.

They sway briefly before gripping the sides of the sink. Their brain is humming with activity, but through it all their breathing holds slow and steady. Their eyes are closed as they try to parse all the information. Pain and hurt, that's expected. Anger is there, and disgust, but maybe they've been there the whole time, quashed beneath some barrier in their diseased brain. Relief is there too, that maybe they're still a person after all if they can endure this. They open their eyes to regard their reflection. A thin sanguine trail has traveled down from the cuts across their flat stomach to disappear into their sparse pubic hair.

There's a knock at the bathroom door as they close the knife. The door is closed, but unlocked. Toriel would never come in, though, she respects Kris' privacy to a fault.

"Kris?" Her voice is soothing and comforting and Kris enjoys it while they can still feel, "Is everything okay in there? It's been a while."

"I'm fine," They say, "I'll just be a minute."

And just like that her curiosity is sated and she's gone. Their revelations are all gone as well, leaving only the sharp, throbbing pain in their stomach as they snatch some toilet paper to clean the blood away and put pressure on the cuts. They're not very deep and they stop bleeding quickly enough as Kris goes about pulling on underwear and slacks one-handed. Satisfied that the wounds had stopped weeping, they gather more toilet paper, remove a dispenser of transparent masking tape from their pants pocket and haphazardly dress their cuts. It would do for now and proper medical tape and gauze might be noticed missing anyway.

Finally, they pocket the knife and the tape dispenser and throw the bloodied paper into the toilet and flush it down before pulling their shirt on, covering the new cuts and the patchwork of old ones that lined their stomach, more on their non-dominant side than the other. One last look over and it was as if nothing had ever happened. Just like every other time. They reached for the doorknob.

*They'll figure it out. You can't do this forever.

Perhaps not, but it made little difference in the now. Kris looked to the mirror again where their reflection was glaring at them, but they ignored it and thought about what was inside the medicine cabinet.

*That won't help either, you know. It will just cloud you up more. Slow you down and shake you up like your own personal earthquake in slow motion.

The quiet would be nice, though. And they might be able to sleep through the night.

*And give up a good four-in-the-morning orgasm when there's nothing better to do?

Some sacrifices had to be made. Even so, they found themselves turning the doorknob and pulling and already it was too late, they were stepping out of the bathroom.

Susie sits next to Kris during lunch with a tray of school food that she absolutely hates but always eats. Every time they notice this, they think about encouraging Noelle to make her a boxed lunch, but somehow it always slips their mind. She sits next to Kris and says some salutation before digging into her meal with a familiar fervor.

*Kiss her.

They don't. Kris isn't quite sure how they feel about Susie, but they're very sure that Susie would not be receptive of that. She'd probably beat them within an inch of their life. And besides, they wouldn't betray Noelle like that.

"Kris? Uh..." Her voice cuts through the fog in their mind and they look to her, but she's looking at the table. They follow her gaze to find that the back of their hand was lightly touching the back of hers where it rests against the table. Her scales are smooth and cool, and

when her fingers twitch, Kris can feel the sinew and tendons beneath them flex. Kris frowns and pulls their hand away with a mumbled apology. Susie seems eager to forget about it and move on with her meal as Kris eyes their hand suspiciously. Losing control was a bad sign, one that had approached faster than they thought it would. How much longer before they started seeing things?

*It's not so bad. Some people would give anything to see what you see.

They doubted that, but refused to follow the train of thought. They ate, half listening to Susie when she said that she wanted to check the closet today. Kris nods, but they don't expect it to be any different then it had been the past few days. From there their conversations go about the usual pace. School, homework, current events. Soon the bell is ringing and they're standing, depositing their garbage and back in the halls. Susie and Kris are silent as they walk, and they prefer it that way. It's a comfortable thing, not having to fill a void with unnecessary words. Susie tests the closet in passing, but it's locked as usual. She kicks it in frustration, adding to the now noticeable dent near the bottom of the door. They make their way back into the hall and towards the classroom, passing by the lockers where other students were gathered.

*Yo, Kris, your guts still in place or did they bubble out of you like uncooked sausages?

Kris stops and looked in the direction of the voice as Susie continues, not noticing. MK is there with Snowy. They seem to be talking about something, but Kris was absolutely sure that MK had just spoken to them. Had just been looking at them.

*Kiss him.

The next moment, MK's face is all they can see and it takes a moment for them to recall why. He had only been one and a half steps away so closing the distance had been easy. Snowy had stepped aside immediately and Kris was aware he was staring at

them as they pressed their hand against the locker behind MK. Despite not having arms, MK tended to prefer his left side, so Kris barred his escape with their right arm. They were roughly the same height, MK slightly taller, and so close that their breath mingled. Stale cafeteria food and mild halitosis.

“Uh... y-yo, Kris...” He says, pressing back against the lockers behind him, “Can I get a little space..?”

This is wrong, Kris thinks. They should step away, treat it like a bad prank, but their body feels like it's in a fog. Their vision is vibrating. A hand grips their left arm and shakes them and the spell is broken. Kris turns to see Noelle, a determined set in her frowning eyes. It takes them a moment to realize there's a crowd of still students watching them now, even Susie is there staring at them with wide eyes.

“Hey, Kris,” Noelle says, her voice gentle but insistent, “Come with me for a minute, okay?”

There's movement in the corner of their eye, and when they look they see that MK had ducked under their arm and stood by Snowy, staring at Kris like one would a viper. Slowly, Kris lowers their hand from the wall and nods to Noelle before they are all but dragged into the nearest girls bathroom. Noelle leaves them by the sink before going to check the stalls to ensure their privacy. When she turns she sees that Susie had joined them, her purple scales looking odd from the white light reflected off the white tiles.

“Kris, what the hell was that about?” Susie asks, “First of all, MK? You could do way better than him--”

“Susie, that's not important right now,” Noelle's voice is patient as she joins them. Kris had pressed themselves into a corner and now with them both there they truly felt trapped. “Kris, when did you stop taking them?”

*Don't answer that. She'll get Toriel.

Kris says nothing and waits. Noelle sees that this line of questioning won't go anywhere and shakes her head.

"It's not important, does your mom still have some in her purse?"

Noelle is close enough to be within reach. She's also closest to the door. Ever since she was young she always needed a minute to recover from a shock to her system and that was always the perfect time for a get-away. From behind their curtain of hair, Kris looks down at Noelle's body and they wonder if they could do that to her.

*What's a little sexual assault between friends?

Their hand twitches, but they will it to stay at their side. They refuse to cross that line, especially with her. All at once the bathroom feels too small. They eye the exit again.

"Kris, remember what Azzy said?" Her voice is still gentle and it irritates Kris. They sigh.

"'You can trust Noelle'," they say, their voice quiet. Noelle nods encouragingly.

"You can trust Noelle," She repeats, "Just let me find Ms. Toriel and we can get your pills--"

"You should make Susie a boxed lunch. You still love her, right?"

Deer, meet headlights. Noelle's voice is strangled somewhere in her throat and beside her Susie sputters. Kris ducks to the side and is gone before Noelle can even begin to regain control. The hallways are empty, class has started, but they don't bother going. There's a desperate need for fresh air. They push their way out the front doors of the school building and follow the road north.

*A hit below the belt and the ref takes a point away!

Kris ignores it. They're not proud of what they said, but all at once they had felt so confined. They had needed to escape and it had been all they could think of to get away. Besides, with both of them together like that, maybe it was the push they needed to start talking to each other.

*Talk your way around it all you want, that was all you, pal. Not me.

That hurts a bit. They had maintained control of their faculties the entire time they had been in the bathroom but their thoughts had been questionable to say the least. Noelle deserved an apology. They sigh as they sit on the edge of the wall that overlooks the lake. The walk here had been easy, there had been no cops to dodge and the town was practically dead at this time of day. It was about as far away from school as they could get as well and that was important. They found their eyes traveling along the rocky shore beneath them.

*Gonna Virginia Woolf it? That could be romantic. Just us in a void of black.

And Onion.

*We don't talk about Onion.

Kris falls back against the grass and lets out a slow breath as they gaze up at the endless cerulean sky. A long silence passes and they wonder if they had fallen asleep in between the blinking of their eyes.

*Sing to me.

"I'm not your lover," Kris mutters.

*No? After everything we've been through, you might as well be. Thick and thin, ups and downs. Even in bed, late at night.

Kris holds in a snort. "Masturbation doesn't count."

*You like being talked dirty to and you know it. Just sing me a song.

Kris sighs and thinks for a long while before beginning to hum. It's quiet and warbly, but they're not looking to do a big performance anyway. They correct when the words start, but still keep it breathy and pitched down.

"All you have is your fire,
And the place you need to reach,
Don't you ever tame your demons,
But always keep them on a leash."

"Huh. I didn't know you could sing."

Of course. Kris sighed and tilted their head up to see Susie approaching, hands in her jacket pockets.

"You weren't supposed to know that," They say as they sit up. Susie chuckles as she squats down before sitting beside them.

"Tough shit, I know now," She grins sidelong at them, flashing teeth, "Now I know to bother you if I ever need a tune."

They sit in silence for a long moment, looking out across the water before Susie finally pulls her hands from her pockets and tosses something at Kris. They nearly fumble it before they get hold of it with both hands and stare down at a familiar pill bottle.

"Where did you get this?" They murmur.

"Noelle told me you keep it in your medicine cabinet. Said to look for the one with the most warnings on it, and I mean damn, that's some serious shit they have you on," She says.

"You got this from my house?" Kris glances at her.

"You really need to lock your doors, y'know?" She grins again, "There's some unscrupulous characters around here."

*Throw it in the lake.

They consider it before setting the pill bottle between them and leaning forward to rest their elbows on their thighs. They take in this moment as if it'll be the last one, it very well may be. The sound of the water lapping at the shore, the feel of the breeze and the grass beneath them. Susie's warm presence beside them.

"So how long have you needed to take that stuff?" And there it is. The first in a familiar long line of questions that spelled the death of the comforting silence between the two of them.

"Since I was young," They say, "started off like usual. Imaginary friends, doing things I didn't mean to. Then one day the weatherman was talking to me, saying how everyone saw me as the monster-killer of Hometown."

"I don't know, when you say it like that, it's kinda metal," She grins again but it's brief and she looks out at the water. "So how long have you been off them?"

Kris shrugs. "I don't know really. Time is hard to track when I'm not taking them. Asriel was the only one who could really make me take them. He was the only one I thought didn't have it out for me. It worried him when he was leaving, I think. He went around to see if there were others I trusted."

"Ah, so that explains 'you can trust Noelle'," She nodded, "Makes sense. Then why did you stop taking them?"

"The side effects are a bitch," They mutter, "I shake and everything gets slow. Get sick. Get fat."

"Kris, you're the thinnest person I've ever met and we've literally met a coat rack," Susie laughed, "You could use some fat."

A brief smile passes between them before there's silence again. It's not a long as the one before it.

“What happens when you don’t take them?”

*Do not answer that.

“Voices, mostly,” They say, “They talk to me, try to make me do things.”

“So... it wasn’t your idea to suck face with MK?” Susie peers at Kris from the corner of her eyes.

“Not really. I haven’t had a thing for MK for a few years now.”

“Ew. You could do so much better,” She huffed, shaking her head, “So between getting fat or kissing MK, I’m seeing no contest.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” They sigh.

“Oh I’m sure, but you don’t exactly seem to be happy when you’re not taking them,” She pointed out, “And you said you lose control sometimes? I mean I’ve been drunk before, I kinda get the allure, but you really don’t make it sound fun. Maybe it’ll be more fun to be in control of yourself.”

She picks up the bottle and holds it out to Kris again and with a sigh they take it. They turn it over in their hands before taking the top off and looking inside. It’s nearly full.

*Take them all. With those claws of hers, she’d never try to make you barf them up, she’d tear your mouth apart before she did anything useful.

They stared down at the colorful tablets and know that she’s watching them. They’re at a crossroads and for a few slow breaths they wonder which direction they’ll choose until finally they reach in and fish out a pill, pop it in their mouth and swallow it dry.

*You rotten little bitch.

Go to hell, they think as they replace the lid and put the bottle next to them before falling back on the grass with a sigh. A moment later and Susie is lying beside them as they look up at the sky.

“Hey so uh...” Susie begins and it takes Kris a moment to realize she’s talking to them. The pills seem to be already taking effect. “I kind of have a date in a couple days and I was wondering if you could give me some pointers.”

Kris looks over to see Susie is pointedly not looking at them, the scales on her face flushed a brilliant magenta. A blink later and she’s glaring at them because they’re laughing, low and quiet.

“I can throw you in the lake you know,” She mutters.

“Onion will just pull me back out,” Kris smiles.

“Who?”

“Nevermind. First of all we need to wash your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” She sounds offended.

“You don’t condition it is what’s wrong. Second we need to find you clothes that don’t have holes in them...”

Not quite satisfied with this one, but I'm glad I got it down.

The Fire Dream

Chapter 2: The Fire Dream

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Susie knew it was a dream almost immediately because the water in the lake was upside-down. How she could define that she wasn't quite sure, it was one of those conclusions that could only be observed and made in dreams, but it was jarring enough to shake her from her stupor. Plucking her cigarette from her mouth, she looked back to where the path leading away from the lake should have been and only saw trees surrounding her, standing close and tall. She thought of leaping over them briefly before a hand brushed over hers.

Jumping, she looked down to see a human child holding her cigarette now, watching as the smoke slid into the dull light at the end of it before raising it to their lips and taking a drag befitting someone of long practice then a child of ten.

"What would you do if you had a human soul?" The child asked, smoke puffing out of their mouth as they spoke.

"Are you offering yours?" Susie had meant it as a joke, but it didn't come out sounding like that.

"If I did, what would you do with it?"

"I don't know," Susie admitted, shrugging, "I'd be super powerful, right? Probably whatever I wanted until it got boring."

The child hummed and took another long pull on the cigarette before offering it back to her. When she took it, the human was suddenly standing much taller now, a little taller than her shoulder. She brought the smoke to her lips and took a drag as she regarded them. She had seen Kris as a kid, sure, but not frequently. She had

forgotten what they looked like back then, but now, standing here as they were it should have been easy to tell it was them.

“What would you do if you had a human soul?” She asked finally, watching them from the corner of her eye. They turned their head to regard her, then looked back to the water.

“I would probably destroy it,” they said, “It’s only human to destroy something beautiful.”

“What would you have left, then?” She frowned, “Would that make you a monster?”

“No. A demon probably.” They motioned for her hand and she offered them the cigarette again. They took it and regarded it for a long moment before taking a final pull off it, then with practiced ease, flicked it into the forest around them. The fire started up almost immediately afterwards, spreading from tree to tree yet moving oddly as if it was in reverse. Susie turned to look at it, but as she did Kris turned towards her as well and their combined movement seemed to twist the world around them.

When Susie came back to her senses she found herself in a familiar room, on a familiar bed, and Kris was beneath her with their mouth pressed against hers, blowing smoke into her. She took the lungful and pulled away, eyes closed tight as the smoke curdled somewhere in her brain, prying her synapses apart and filling them with something alien. When she exhaled, it came out as a light that floated up to the ceiling and disappeared into the exposed beams.

Kris’ arms slid up around her neck and she looked down at them again. Their shirt was missing and the way their legs were wrapped around her hips was intoxicating. Their eyes were what arrested her attention, though. On their back like this, their bangs had been brushed back over their head and two red eyes glittered at her like rubies. They pulled her down and their mouth brushed hers before trailing along her jaw.

“Would you stop me?” Kris whispered to her. Susie wasn’t sure. Ability and willingness weren’t the same thing. She knew it was very much in her power to stop Kris, but as their hand slid down her chest and abdomen and slid up under her shirt to rest against her waist she couldn’t decide if she wanted them to stop. It had been a long, long time since she had a dream like this. “Not even if it destroyed you?”

“Are you calling me beautiful?” She breathed, “I might question your taste.”

“Nothing is appreciated in its own time,” They said in between kisses down her throat that sent sparks into her abused brain. When they bit her with their blunt teeth, Susie sobbed a sound that she was sure would have been embarrassing.

“Why is this happening?” Her voice sounded calmer then she felt. Kris’ hand on her cheek angled her head down as they leaned up and pressed their lips to hers. Through her haze she saw that orange light was being cast through the window on them and in the distance she heard the crackling of flames.

“I wanted to warn you,” Their voice echoed in her mind even as their tongue pressed past her lips, “Something is going to happen and I think I know how it’s going to end. If I start doing something bad, Susie, I want you to stop me. Please.”

The sound of the window opening broke them apart and they looked over as flames crawled in and began to combust in the piles of dirty clothes and tattered carpet. She turned to look back down at Kris but again the world spun and blurred and she gasped as cold metal pressed against her back. Strong hands held her arms above her head, pinned against the wall behind her. Again there were lips against hers, but they were familiar and this time she wanted to bite and gnash at them. She tried to step forward, but hips pressed into hers and kept her pinned until her partner finally pulled away.

“Look out for Kris for me, okay?” Asriel asked. They were in a hallway at school. Orange light was flooding through the windows and casting strange dancing shadows on the floor.

“You don’t get to treat me like your dirty little secret then ask for favors,” She growled at him as she pulled at her hands. Asriel had always been stronger than her, but even so they didn’t even budge against her wriggling. “Especially when you just leave.”

“You’re probably right,” He smiles sadly down at her and she hates the part of herself that wants to soothe him. Hated how good it felt to be this close to him again, how his lips tasted, and how he smelled of that goddamn pet shampoo. “Just keep an eye on them if you can. I don’t think they’ll do very good without me.”

“They’re doing just fine,” She snapped, “You’re not needed. By either of us.”

He hums and nods before leaning down towards her again. This time she does bite him, but as her teeth make contact, Asriel is suddenly engulfed in golden flames. They spread down along her arms and into her throat where they make contact, filling her up and covering her over until there was nothing left of her. Then she woke up.

I liked writing this one. It really took off on it's own.

Tying up Loose Ends

Chapter 3: Tying up Loose Ends

A sequel to The Fire Dream.

Kris had told him once that they thought they were born the moment they had stepped into the doorway of the Dreemur house. They said that everything before that was as if it had been in some kind of fog, like a half-remembered story that had happened to someone else, and then suddenly their eyes saw and their fingers touched and it was a realization that everything was beautiful in its imperfection. Suddenly what had happened before didn't matter so much anymore.

Asriel remembered that day too. The whole family had been excited to bring the new child home and when they had stepped up to the doorway, Kris had stood there for a long moment and then began to cry. It was fitting, looking back on it afterwards. When people are born they cry, it's their first exclamation of being, it rings out 'I am here' to a world that only gives silence in return. Looking back, it was the most beautiful thing Asriel had ever seen and he was glad to have been there when Kris realized that they deserved to exist there in that moment with his family.

Now Asriel stood there in the same doorway, his arched horns brushing the top of the frame as he looked into the house he had grown up in and tried to feel just a fraction of what Kris had felt that day. Toriel would no doubt scold him for letting the warm air out, but he felt this was important enough to risk her ire. The minutes passed and Asriel felt nothing. No revelation, no life-altering concept. Just the bitter fog crowding up around his senses that had been haunting him the last couple of months at University.

He pulled the door shut on himself, stepping back onto the small porch before turning and walking down the few steps to the lawn. It was a few days into his visit back home for winter break and, despite his mood, everything had been going well. He had caught up with his old friends and neighbors and made plans for how to spend the next few weeks he had off from university. Today was technically a day he had set aside for himself and his family, but Kris had a couple of back-to-back appointments and Toriel had elected to join them, if only to chauffeur.

Asriel walked down familiar streets, only slowing to wave and smile at familiar faces, but not stopping to talk as he made his way to a familiar diner. It was slow at this time and he took a window seat he had shared with Kris often when they were young. He was asked if he'd like a hot chocolate, but he ordered coffee instead. He did his best not to glance over every time he heard the door chime and instead looked out the window. There was a layer of snow on the ground, trampled and streaked from foot traffic to reveal dead grass and mud. It looked like the local kids had been by and had gathered up as much as they could for snowball fights and figures.

"Well if it isn't the patron Saint of Hometown," Her voice was close and mocking as she walked past him to the opposite side of the table and slid onto the seat. He offered her a wan smile.

"Howdy Susie. Thanks for coming," He said as she set her elbows on the table and looked at him from behind messy locks of brown hair.

"I gotta say, you got guts calling me," She grunted as she folded her arms, "Especially after--"

She cut herself off as the waitress approached to take her order. She began to dismiss her, but when Asriel said he would cover it she discovered her appetite. After placing her order, the waitress left and Susie fixed Asriel with a glare. Despite himself, he couldn't stop smiling. Susie was only a few years younger than he himself was, and yet it seemed like so much had changed in the short time he had

been gone. She was nearly as tall as he was now, broad in the shoulders, and without the baby fat that had rounded her cheeks. Gone were the awkward movements of a girl who grew too tall too fast, and now there was a rasp to her voice that promised a smoky tone in a few more years.

“Get that stupid look off your face before I knock it off you,” She growled at him and he chuckled, leaning away from her.

“Sorry. I was just surprised at how pretty you became,” He admitted. She stared at him like he admitted to burying bodies in his backyard. She collected herself quickly and took in a breath to level another glare at him.

“Let's get one thing clear,” She tapped a claw against the table between them, “We’re done, so whatever smooth moves you’re thinking of pulling? Don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Asriel said, holding up his hands in what he hoped was a placating manner, “I didn’t mean it like that. I honestly just want to talk. Tie up all the loose ends.”

“There wouldn’t be any if you just talked to me before you left instead of disappearing,” She said, folding her arms. Asriel nodded after a sip of coffee.

“I know. I won’t bother you with excuses, what happened was uncalled for,” He sighed, “Then at the time you didn’t have a phone and I couldn’t get a hold of you. I honestly wasn’t trying to avoid you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and he broke eye contact to look at the window which was already fogged over from his body heat.

“So, how have you been?” He asked, bringing his mug to his lips, “Still with your parents?”

“Unfortunately,” She shrugged, “I get out when I can but I’m counting down the days until the cops stop bringing me back.”

“Mom would help you, you know,” He didn’t have to see her to know she was shaking her head.

“No, I told you, we’re not doing that. I know you’re Boss Monsters and all, but...”

She trailed off when their eyes met again. Anyone in Hometown would go on about the kind and compassionate Asriel, how he went out of his way to help and avoided conflict. He liked to think it was true, he tried hard to be that person, but even he could be pushed to the edge.

Once, during practice after school, Susie had shown up with a split lip and a sizable bruise on the side of her face. He had been shocked she’d let herself be seen like that, it wasn’t often that she’d even show up to watch him practice, let alone advertise to people that she might have been beaten in a fight. It took a lot to get the story out of her, and Asriel suspected he wouldn’t have if she didn’t secretly want some kind of comfort from him in the first place. ‘Furious’ was a mild way to define the mood he had been in when she told him how her father had knocked her around before cornering her with a hammer threatening to cave her head in. Asriel had demanded to know where Susie lived, had promised retribution borne in magical fire. She managed to talk him down, but he told her if she ever needed him to come, he’d be there. It had been a promise, and now in the gaze he gave her, it was there again.

Just say the word and he’s gone.

“Leave it alone, Asriel,” Her voice was firm, and a moment later his eyes lost their edge and drifted to the window again. Silence descended on them as the waitress returned with Susie’s meal and a pot to top off Asriel’s coffee. Susie began eating immediately, but it lacked her usual fervor. Asriel was drawing shapes into the window with his finger when she spoke up again.

“What about you? What have you been doing?”

He shrugged. “School work, nothing really interesting to talk about. A lot of responsibility and not a whole lot to show for it.” He grinned at her, “I did have a dream that you attacked me with an axe.”

She smirked at him, “Don’t think I wasn’t tempted when I came in. You probably deserved it.”

“Most likely,” He chuckled and lets the silence hang for a moment as he circled the lip of his mug with a finger, “Actually I’ve been having some trouble with sleep recently. With a few things.”

“What, you finally figure out you snore?”

“*You* snore,” He shot back, “And drool.” He smiled at her chuckle. “When did you get good at banter?”

She shrugged, chewing thoughtfully. “I guess my friends taught me. Kris and Noelle and Ralsei and Lancer.”

“I don’t know the last two,” He admitted.

“They’re not from around here,” She said, “I see them occasionally. They’re good people.”

“What about school? You’re still going, right?”

“The less said about school the better,” She grunted, “But yeah, I’m still going. Might even graduate.”

A silence fell over them and Asriel looks at the designs he put on the window while Susie made quick work of the rest of her meal. 3D boxes on shaky perspectives, triangles with sloppy angle calculations, stick figures of monsters, and a single carefully drawn flower. He lowered his hand to the table and took a deep gulp of coffee.

“What about partners?” He tried to sound casual, “Find anybody?”

“Asriel...” She sighed, her tone more tired than frustrated.

“Susie, I just want to know if--”

“If there’s competition?” She glared at him, her mouth pursed, “Yeah, there’s a couple of contenders. Is that what you want to hear?”

“It is, actually,” He said, nodding with a nonchalance he didn’t quite feel, “I hoped you would move on. Hoped you’d find someone better than me.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as the waitress came to take her empty plate and leave the bill. He reached into his pocket and set his card on top of it. The waitress gathered both and walked away again.

“What’s going on, Asriel?” She asked at last.

“Like I said, I’m tying up loose ends,” He said as he leaned back in his seat. “It always bothered me how things were left between us. I understand you don’t want to go back to that, but--”

“But you do?” He meets her eyes, trying to place her tone. They held each other’s gaze for a long beat after that. Asriel paused before reaching his hand across the table, palm up and open. Susie stared at it for a long moment before meeting his eyes again.

“Humor me for just a moment,” Asriel said quietly, “Just five seconds.”

She hesitated before finally reaching across and putting her hand in his. Her hand was as big as his was and only slightly warm during this time of year. His thumb brushed over her knuckles and counted along the crevasses between her fingers. He examined the contrast of her dark purple scales and his white fur as he changed his grip and interlaced his fingers with hers, examined her claws where they lightly rested against his knuckles. It felt nice, he thought, but Susie had always felt nice. Cool and transient and real to compliment his heat and permanence.

There were no sparks, however. The bottom of his heart didn't drop out, no shortness of breath, no butterflies in his stomach.

Five seconds passed and Susie pulled away and there was such a finality in that movement alone that Asriel was left staring at the back of his hand as he processed it.

"I understand you don't want to go back to that," He repeated at last, bringing his hand back to his side of the table and covering it with the other, "But I'd still like to be friends, if that's possible."

"Cut the bullshit, Asriel," She said and he was glad she had enough wherewithal to keep her voice quiet, "You know who says things like 'tie up loose ends'? Gangsters and cancer patients, so what's your deal?"

The waitress returned with more receipts, his card, and a pen. He pocketed his card and wrote down a tip before totaling the expenses, using it as an excuse to avert his gaze.

"There are things I'm coming to terms with," He said at last, "A lot has changed and I've had a lot to think about. Especially about the future. I don't think I'll be coming back to Hometown when I graduate."

"So what, you want to become friends so you can bail again?" Her tone is accusatory, but he doesn't rise to it.

"I wouldn't do that to you again, Susie," He said as sincerely as he could, looking up to meet her eyes again, "I would keep in touch with you and everyone else I'm close to, but I don't think I have a place here in Hometown anymore. Besides, don't pretend like you didn't talk about leaving Hometown either."

"What are you talking about? Your parents are here, the whole damn town loves you, how do you not have a place here?"

"There's no other Boss Monsters here except my family."

“What does that have to do with anything? Is this some kind of racial purity thing?”

He sighed, “What do you remember learning about Boss Monsters?”

“What is this a pop-quiz?” She muttered, “Big bad monsters, all powerful, born to rule, yadda yadda.”

“And eternal life.”

She squinted at him, “What?”

“Until they have children, all Boss Monsters have eternal life. We don’t get old, we don’t fall down,” He said, “We can get sick or killed like anybody else, but like you said; we’re all powerful, so it’s not exactly common.”

“So have a kid, shit.” She waved a dismissive hand, “Don’t have to go far for that.”

“See that’s the thing. I don’t know if it works if only one parent is a Boss Monster. Besides, you never got pregnant and we weren’t exactly careful.” Asriel couldn’t help but smile when he saw color rise in Susie’s cheeks.

“I don’t see the rush,” She muttered after she composed herself, “A guaranteed long life doesn’t sound bad to me.”

“You’re not the one staring down the barrel of eternity,” Asriel said, fatigue clear in his voice, “it was bad enough learning that my existence is essentially leeching power from my parents, but then to go through my life watching everyone I care about pass away? Watch you and Kris get old and fall down and I’m still in the prime of my life? Or what if we were just really lucky and I can get a normal Monster pregnant, but what if it doesn’t work and they just grow up like normal Monsters do? I couldn’t survive having to bury my child, Susie. I don’t want to risk it.”

She was quiet for a long time before nodding, "So you thought you'd fix things while you were here and had plenty of time. Makes sense, I guess."

"Things get in motion fast. It's one of the reasons why I never had a chance to say goodbye to you when I left to university," Asriel said, "I didn't want to wait till I graduated and was pulled away before I had managed to set things right and prepare everything."

A long silence stretched between them. Asriel's phone buzzed and he fished it from his pocket and checked the screen. There was a message from Toriel, she was on her way home.

"Well, I think that's enough for today," He said as he slid his phone back into his pocket, "Thanks for coming, Susie. I'm really glad we got to talk."

She frowned at him for a moment in thought. "Your graduation is still a ways off, right? Like a few years? If you really want to be my friend you better put in the effort. I expect to see you from time-to-time before you're gone."

He smiled at her gently and nodded. "Of course."

They both shimmied out of the booth and Asriel waved goodbye to the waitresses as they made their way out into the snow. Susie shuddered and Asriel considered giving her his coat, but he knew she'd refuse it. Instead he increased the heat around himself. She glanced at him briefly but said nothing. Together, they walked side-by-side down the street to where it became an intersection. A goodbye was on his lips as he turned to the left to head north towards his home but he stopped before he could run into Susie.

She was facing him, her hands in her jacket pockets as their eyes met. Their breath came out in plumes in the chilly afternoon air, more from him than from her, and mingled together between them before disappearing. With her bangs out of the way, he could see that she was thinking about something important to say to him so he decided

to wait and let her resolve her words. Instead she took a half a step forward and Asriel had to keep himself from flinching. She was so close that their bodies were almost touching. The bottom corners of her jacket were twitching against his abdomen like she was trying to decide what she should do with her hands, while Asriel had made fists with his own because he suddenly didn't trust himself not to try and hold her.

Holding hands with her had been a long five seconds. This felt far, *far* longer. He tried not to think about the last time they were this close. How needy and desperate they had been, so full of frustration and anger that it had bled into their lovemaking leaving him with scratches he had carefully kept covered for over a week after. Tried not to think about how she had tasted on his tongue or the way she would cry his name and how it echoed in his dreams sometimes. Tried not to think about how their first time had been so awkward but that had been okay because they would have to stop to laugh at how different and imperfect it was from movies or books and it had been so much damn fun. Tried not to think about her pressed against him while he listened to her sleep and how her head on his arm would cut off circulation *every single* time but he dared not move because it was when Susie was asleep like this that Asriel thought she looked the most beautiful, without her worries and insecurities and defenses to line her face.

Tried not to think about how near the end they argued more and kept secrets from each other. Tried not to think about that one horrible night when they realized their relationship was beginning to mirror their parents in her father's anger and his mother's manipulation. How every time they tried to fix things, something else would come up and send them back to square one.

Tried not to think about how his brain wanted her so bad it hurt, but his body felt nothing from the promise of her.

Five seconds passed and whatever Susie had been meaning to say died somewhere in her mouth. She took a half a step back, then a step to the side, and then she was walking past him heading south.

“See you around, O’Saint,” She called over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” his voice came out as a drawn whisper, “Sure.”

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there before he started walking again. In his mind the fog pressed in tight around him. It smelled like Susie’s cheap shampoo, cigarettes, and old leather. By the time he got home his mothers SUV was still gone, but he suspected she’d be home any minute now. He made his way up the short flight of steps to the porch and pushed open the front door. He stopped in the doorway, looking into the house he had grown up in.

And waited.